



Understanding and Working with the Veteran Student

A Guide for Educators

BRET A. MOORE

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About the Author

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Dedication

To my daughter, Kaitlyn.

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As with most things in my life, this book would have not been possible if it were not for many people. I want to thank Sharon Young and David Dusthimer from Pearson for giving me the opportunity to develop a book on such an important topic. Their guidance and support were invaluable. I am grateful to my wife, Lori, for her unwavering support and love. My professional mentors, Drs. Bruce Crow and Dennis Grill, have made it possible for me to understand the military culture as well as I do; for this I am indebted to them. And last, I am grateful to the men and women in uniform and their families for the countless sacrifices they have made and continue to make for me and my loved ones.

Preface

If you are an educator, you are likely experiencing an influx of veteran students into your classroom. Today's former troops have access to the most comprehensive educational benefits in history. Consequently, many more veterans are entering colleges, universities, and trade schools, which would have previously been cost-prohibitive.

Educational benefits for veterans are nothing new. Following World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (typically referred to as the GI Bill) included educational benefits for returning veterans. By the end of 1956, more than 2 million veterans had used some form of educational benefit to attend college, with another 6 million accessing funds to learn a specific vocational trade or skill. In 1984, the original GI Bill was revamped and became the Montgomery GI Bill. With a minimal financial contribution from the service member, increased educational benefits were made available in the revised bill. Most recently, the Montgomery GI Bill gave way to the even-more-generous Post-9/11 GI Bill. Veterans are now eligible to receive full tuition costs in their state public institutions, reimbursement for the cost of books and supplies, and a monthly living stipend.

As classrooms become filled with veterans, instructors need to understand how to effectively assist them with maximizing their learning experience and preparing them for their future careers. This is an incredible responsibility. We owe a great debt to those who have served our country and its citizens faithfully. We must remember the mistakes we made as a society with our previous veterans so that we do not make them again. Providing financial assistance alone is not sufficient. We must take a holistic approach. Many veteran students need help reintegrating back into civilian society. They need psychological and family support, assistance accessing benefits, and freedom from judgment and misconceptions. When their needs are greater than what we can provide, it is incumbent upon us to know where to send them for the help they deserve. If I was successful, this book will help you become a part of this holistic solution.

FOREWORD

Exciting New Horizons—Unique Challenges

During our nearly four decades of involvement in the educational policy arena at the federal congressional level, we have come to deeply appreciate the importance of education to every aspect of our citizenry's overall quality of life and cumulatively to that of our nation. Education is the key to the 21st century. An enlightened and humane society requires a well educated populous. Advances in education are directly related to an individual's employment opportunities, family income, and even one's physical and psychological health status. Today our educational institutions are facing dramatic challenges as our society undergoes significant demographic and cultural changes. Of particular import are the consequences of the unprecedented advances occurring almost daily within the communications and computer technology fields which are directly impacting the day-to-day educational process. The students of today are not yesterday's students. Nor are they our parents' or grandparents' students. Their life experiences, including constant access from an early age to online networks/social environments, have created dramatically new expectations and new ways of learning and conceptualizing. They are accustomed to having access to previously unfathomable data bases and extraordinary sources of information. Ensuring the availability of quality education in a cost effective manner has appropriately become a high priority for the Obama Administration. How one accurately measures success in imparting useful knowledge and especially in developing critical learning skills remains a constant challenge. A necessary first step, we would suggest, is understanding the unique strengths, interests, and learning skills of one's target audience—as well as any systemic barriers.

As a nation we have now been engaged in over a decade of armed conflict resulting in the resiliency and needs of the members of our Armed Forces, and those of their families, becoming an almost daily topic in the popular media. The composition of our Armed Forces has fundamentally changed in the recent past, with more women enrolled and young family members being directly impacted. The underlying nature of the most recent conflicts has also changed dramatically, while at the same time modern technology has allowed geographically distant family members to have daily access to their loved ones and to share their joys and stresses. More than ever before, those injured in combat are surviving and returning home to new and hopefully productive lives. Their psychological well being, as well as that of their more fortunate colleagues and their youthful families,

is of immediate concern to their leaders, our nation's elected officials, and society as a whole. Fortunately, proactive federal legislation has been enacted to pave the way for the rehabilitation of those injured and the meaningful reintegration of all involved into society.

Although many former military service men and women who are now students may have shared what is considered to be a unique military culture and experience, with its high value placed upon following orders, group cohesion, and (often unappreciated by many) obtaining advanced education, it is important for educators and their universities to appreciate that the individual student's strengths and weaknesses must always be paramount in their interactions with these future colleagues. Many popular myths exist about the soldier, sailor, airman, or marine which must give way to the reality of the individual student and his or her unique family situation. Those who have made a career of the military, or those who have grown up in military families, often will have a different perspective than those who have only served a relatively brief period of time. All, however, have undoubtedly amply demonstrated that they can, and ultimately will, succeed if our nation's educators provide an intellectually challenging and appropriately supportive learning environment.

Personally, after having served for nearly four decades at a senior congressional staff level position, I am now fortunate to have the exciting opportunity to work closely with colleagues within a health sciences educational institution of the Department of Defense. Almost all of our students are still on active duty and it is an understatement to say that they are inspirational. Their personal journeys may differ; however, their ongoing dedication to excellence, the future, and our nation is unsurpassed. Perhaps they do not bring a "clean slate" with them to the classroom, but they are clearly actively forging meaningful connections between their complex life experiences and the academic schema being provided. Mature beyond their chronological years, we have found that they are extraordinary role models for others when engaging in intellectual discourse. In authoring this book, Bret Moore draws upon his extensive personal experiences and expertise to share with the readership his exciting and highly productive vision.

Aloha,

Pat DeLeon, 2000 President of the American Psychological Association.

Chapter 3

Military Culture in the Classroom

Few movements in higher education have been as profound as the incorporation of cultural-diversity techniques and curricula into the classroom. Today's classrooms are filled with students from diverse backgrounds, and today's instructors are required to educate these students who vary in culture, language, socio-economic status, abilities, and other unique characteristics (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). Although much of the emphasis on cultural competency in the classroom has focused on racial and ethnic minorities, continued expansion to address differences of sexual orientation, religion, and even geographical influences (for instance, rural, inner city) is occurring. Obviously, the cultural-diversity movement in education is comprehensive and highly inclusive. However, one group that has received little attention in the classroom regarding the impact of culture and values on learning is the military.

Is the military a unique culture that requires educators to have a fundamental working knowledge of its customs, values, and traditions? To find an answer, one must look away from the pedagogical literature and look to the field of psychology. Moore (2011) reviewed the concept of military culture and how it impacts psychological treatment. In his review, he cited a 2008 paper by Reger and colleagues on the issue of military cultural competence. Related to ethical and competency standards in psychological practice, the authors noted:

To the extent that a culture includes a language, a code of manners, norms of behavior, belief systems, dress, and rituals, it is clear that the Army represents a unique cultural group. (p. 22)

Based on this statement, Moore outlined various ways that the lack of military cultural competence could negatively impact treatment and cause confusion and frustration on the part of the patient and therapist.

Although the specific military branch of the Army was singled out in the Reger and colleagues article, there is no reason to believe that the same principles do not apply to the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. It is also not unreasonable to assume that many of the same principles appropriately transfer to the classroom. Just as in the therapeutic relationship, gaps in cultural understanding can lead to confusion and frustration for the student and educator, which can impede learning and possibly lead to increased risk of dropout for the veteran student.

The remainder of this chapter covers various norms, behaviors, values, and traditions of the military culture and how they may influence learning. Many of the examples provided are based on lessons learned in psychological practice and this author's experience as an Army officer and psychologist and veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Quick Fact

The military is a unique and distinct culture.

Language

Arguably, the starkest difference between the military and general civilian population is language. The military is replete with unique acronyms, abbreviations, words, phrases, and a variety of seemingly strange nonverbal communications. This unique language is based on the necessity of communicating as quickly as possible large amounts of information to peers, supervisors, and subordinates. Adaptive in the combat environment, reduced communication time helps ensure mission tasks are completed promptly, which can impact mission success.

Educator unfamiliar with military culture might find differences in language confusing and unnecessary. However, to facilitate effective communication in the classroom, the educator, at a minimum, should understand that differences exist and work to bridge any obvious gaps. One way to accomplish this is to ask questions. If unclear about a particular term or phrase, the educator should feel comfortable acknowledging his lack of military experience and ask for clarification. Doing so will not just improve communication but also show the veteran that the educator is interested in learning about this unique culture.

Example of an Interaction between a Veteran Student and Instructor

Sir, I'm glad to be a part of your class. I recently **ETS**'d after six years as an **11 Bravo**. When I wasn't on deployment, I spent all my time as an **RTO** at the company or **PMCS**'ing equipment in the motor pool. I hated it. I figured I'd go back to school and let the **POGs** handle the day-to-day hassles of Army life. I didn't think I was going to be able to start this term. **DFAS** screwed up my **DITY** and I just got paid last week. I guess what doesn't make you kill someone makes you stronger.

* ETS = estimated time of separation; 11 Bravo (11B) = infantry; RTO = radio and telephone operator; PMCS = preventive maintenance checks and services; POG = person other than grunt; DFAS = Defense Finance and Accounting Services; DITY = do-it-yourself move

Solution Focused

Service members are taught to be solution focused as opposed to problem oriented. This is best exemplified in the Military Problem Solving Process and the Military Decision Making Process, which service members learn early on in training (Department of the Army, 1999; Department of the Army, 2010). In the classroom, a solution-focused approach has many benefits. The veteran will be proactive in identifying potential obstacles to completing assignments and quickly generate a variety of potential solutions.

Although this is a highly adaptive trait in the military, the veteran might be seen as pushy, bossy, and overbearing by other students and possibly the instructor. What the veteran may see as an attempt to alleviate the problem for everyone involved, nonmilitary individuals may feel that their input is not valued or respected. If this occurs, particularly in a group setting, the instructor can acknowledge the veteran's strength in the area of problem solving and facilitate a more collaborative and engaging process for the group.

Military Problem-Solving Process

1. Recognize and define the problem.
2. Gather facts and make assumptions.
3. Define end states and establish criteria.
4. Develop possible solutions.
5. Analyze and compare possible solutions.

6. Select and implement the solution.
7. Analyze the solution for effectiveness.

Military Decision-Making Process

1. Receive mission.
2. Analyze mission.
3. Develop courses of action.
4. Analyze courses of action.
5. Compare courses of action.
6. Approve the decided course of action.
7. Issue orders accordingly.

Quick Fact

Veterans are solution focused as opposed to problem oriented.

Group Versus Individuality

Individuality and independence are highly valued traits in today's American culture. Although valued in the military, they are less important than the group. Specifically, the traits of individuality and independence are viewed as a potential threat to cohesiveness, morale, and mission effectiveness. These views will likely carry over into the classroom.

The culturally sensitive instructor will understand that attempts to focus the veteran student on seemingly self-serving ideas and tasks (worry about your grade and not your classmates) may be met with resistance. Instead, the veteran may find more meaning and success in supporting the group, whether that is the entire classroom or a small group within the classroom, in completing assignments. This can be a huge boon for instructors who prefer group-learning activities or who have classes with high numbers of veteran students.

Hierarchical Class System

The military is built upon a rigid and unambiguous hierarchical system. As most things in the military, this system is adaptive. It can also be adaptive in the classroom. Whereas nonmilitary students may be more resigned to a passive role in the

class, veteran students are in a good position to model leadership, proficiency, and pride in task completion. A culturally sensitive instructor will utilize the veteran student's comfort with taking charge and assign responsibilities and roles as appropriate. A culturally sensitive instructor will also realize that within the military's hierarchical structure those of higher rank shoulder the responsibility of making sure those "under" him succeed. The instructor may find this a tremendous help when needing assistance with training and supervising students with lesser skills and abilities.

The Shame of Weakness

The military is an organization based on strength and pride. So, veteran students struggling in the classroom might be more sensitive to perceived failure and criticism from other students and the instructor. To ensure success, the instructor should be strength focused with the veteran student and rely on "sidebar" conversations when criticism of abilities and skills is needed.

"Calling students out" in front of the group will only alienate them from the rest of the class. It will drive a wedge between students and teacher and set the stage for subsequent conflict. Veterans are great at adapting to difficult situations and overcoming weaknesses and limitations. They are not, however, tolerant of perceived shaming and belittling.

Conclusion

Understanding and acknowledging the unique culture from which veteran students come is key to ensuring the success of this highly motivated, talented, and focused group. Veteran students can function not only as model students but also have the backgrounds to enhance classroom activities, assist the instructor, and mentor other students.